

The Weaponization of Travel

MEETING & EVENT PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT – JUNE 2018



THE WEAPONIZATION OF TRAVEL

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Research Background

As travel continues to be weaponized, the Destinations International Foundation and Meetings Mean Business Coalition are working to support their members, as well as the meeting and events industry more broadly, with issue management strategies and communications best practices.

An important industry stakeholder, meetings and event professionals (MEPs) are recommending, selecting and vetting destinations as part of their common job responsibilities. Today, they are navigating a new landscape where there is an established risk of a travel ban, boycott or advisory being declared against their next destination. Destinations International Foundation and Meetings Mean Business recognize the importance of supporting MEPs in this issue landscape, helping them make the best decisions for their various stakeholders.

To that end, Destinations International Foundation and Meetings Mean Business commissioned APCO Insight to conduct a comprehensive research study among meeting and event professionals. Findings from the study will be used to develop tailored communications materials for MEPs.

The initial qualitative phase of this study included a 90-minute online focus group among 32 MEPs on June 13, 2018. To qualify, participants must have influence or decision-making power in selecting meeting destinations. The group included MEPs from across the U.S. and represented a mix of industries such as third-party planners, association or professional society in-house planners and corporate planners.

As part of this preliminary phase, APCO Insight also conducted nine in-depth interviews among MEPs between June 11 and June 25, 2018. In addition to the qualifications listed above, these professionals also planned a meeting or event in a destination targeted by boycotters in the past three years.

The findings from the qualitative research are the focus of this report. Please note that, by nature, qualitative research does not allow for statistical analysis and interpretation. All findings included in this report are meant to provide insight and direction into decision-making and should not be regarded as ultimate truths.

Qualitative findings will be used to inform the development of the subsequent quantitative phase of research which will statistically test the attitudes and perceptions expressed here.

Executive Summary

Unaided, **travel boycotts are not a top-of-mind consideration** when deciding where a meeting or event should take place. Instead, the biggest drivers of an event location are cost, accessibility and safety.

Most MEPs are familiar with travel boycotts, commonly naming LGBT issues, bathrooms bills, NAACP advisories, California government travel bans and union issues as examples of boycotts.

For most, **travel boycotts are something to consider but do not have a large role in decision-making**. Moreover, **few support boycotts** (just four of the 32 participants) as MEPs **want to stay apolitical** and the **unpredictability of boycotts** makes it difficult for planners to incorporate the issue into their decision-making especially for their biggest and most important events. These often require long lead times and significant resource expenditure.

For those who ultimately decided to keep their meeting in a boycotted area, consistent themes emerge:

- **Boycotts start in a window too close to the event.**
- **Attendees were not the subject of the boycott.**
- **CVBs and hotels were vigilant about public outreach** and committed to not enforcing discriminatory policies.
- There was **a lack of pressure from leadership or clients to move the meeting.**

Unaided, most were either **unable to cite a compelling argument in favor of travel boycotts, or restated they are a neutral party in boycotts**. Those who could cite arguments were careful to create space between themselves and the argument, prefacing arguments with statements like “some people think” or “they believe.” The most commonly cited argument was that **boycotts bring attention** to an important issue.

MEPs readily cite arguments later tested in messaging unaided. Once exposed to messaging, there is **strong agreement travel boycotts hurt innocent bystanders like small businesses and local residents**. Audience specific messaging that **“meetings and events are a way to bring people together”** also tested **well**, likely as it appealed to a love of the industry.

Messaging that speaks to **“hurting politicians”** or **“boycotts being ineffective”** does not play as well. On the former, the negative tone feels divisive and there is not agreement that hurting politicians is the goal. The latter is less compelling without facts and figures and some point to cities like Indianapolis as examples to the contrary.

To improve messaging, APCO recommends **incorporating** the reasons MEPs share for opposition to boycotts – **being neutral parties and the unpredictable nature of boycotts** – and **softening divisive, political statements**.

In addition to the core messaging, **MEPs are looking for more information on alternatives**. Almost all agree having all options on the table is beneficial and strongly desired. Overall, if clients or attendees voice a desire to boycott a location, MEPs seem quick to engage with little objection, due in part to a lack of understanding for alternatives. Without this knowledge, MEPs do not feel empowered to advocate for visiting boycotted locations.

- Some MEPs judiciously note moving meetings as a result of a boycott sets a blurry precedent. As one MEP explains, engaging in boycotts would make his job almost impossible, given the chaotic and unpredictable variables of who is engaging, where they happen and for how long they will last. This is especially true for events with long planning periods (often the most important and biggest events planned).
 - *There's such craziness going on at the state level now with all these legislatures that it would be very problematic for us to say, "Well, we just aren't going to any state that has a bathroom bill." – IDI Participant*
- Others note it is hard to please everyone. Inevitably, whether a meeting is moved or not, some attendees are upset either way. Thus, the easiest path for MEPs may very well be to not move a meeting.
 - *We were hearing from our Hispanic members that they would feel uncomfortable going to Phoenix. We were new at the game of how to deal with [travel boycotts]. We hadn't signed a contract and didn't want the blowback. We were trying to respect that issue. But then we heard from people who accused us of being anti-conservative, and not seeing the harm that immigration's doing. – IDI Participant*

A small minority of MEPs have personal experience with boycotts. Recruitment incidence shows a quarter had a meeting or event scheduled in a location that came under boycott pressure. In total, APCO interviewed eight participants who kept their meeting in a boycotted area. Consistent themes emerged from those discussions:

- Most commonly, boycotts start in a window too close to the event. Onset of boycotts are sudden, and, as previously mentioned, canceling would have had a significant financial impact on the organization hosting the meeting.
 - *The cancellation fees were too large. It was a large event... at least 2,000 people. It was so short-term in cancellation, they had to go ahead and move forward with it. – IDI Participant*
- Attendees were not the subject of the boycotts. In the event of a boycott, safety of attendees is a major concern for planners. Unless a substantial number of meeting attendees are the target of legislation being boycotted (and thus safety or discrimination concerns) it is hard to justify a threat to members.
- CVBs and hotels were vigilant about public outreach to ensure the venue would not enforce or conduct itself in a discriminatory manner and that the destination supported inclusive policies after news of the boycott broke. The importance of this should not be understated. The fact that the location was committed to ensuring an inclusive environment was a major MEP argument for why they chose to continue with the event.
- There was no pressure from leadership or clients to move the meeting. As previously noted, most MEPs don't support boycotts, want to remain neutral, and do not want to upend all the time and money spent to date. Once alerted to a boycott, many did work to have costs and back-up locations available if asked to explore the implications of what moving an event would mean, but most MEPs were not proactively bringing the issue to their

clients (internal or external). Ultimately, many MEPs were not feeling pressure to move their meeting and therefore stayed with the status quo.

Messaging

Before introducing MEPs to APCO's drafted messaging, participants were first asked to share compelling arguments they have heard from those supporting and opposing boycotts.

Unaided, most were either unable to cite a compelling argument in support of boycotts or restated they are a neutral party on boycotts. Those who could cite arguments were careful to create space between themselves and the argument, prefacing statements like "some people think" or "they believe." As one MEP articulated, messages in support of boycotts tend to be highly emotional and, in his opinion, divisive, as they try to paint opponents as morally inept. Still, others do not believe there are any compelling arguments.

- *They believe financial impact is the only way to make change. – Focus Group Participant*
- *I'm sure there is a belief they are creating change or shedding light on some issue. – Focus Group Participant*
- *I haven't heard any compelling arguments...just lip service about personal opinions. – Focus Group Participant*

When asked to name compelling arguments made by those who oppose travel boycotts, MEPs readily cite arguments later tested in messaging. The most pervasive arguments are that travel boycotts hurt innocent bystanders and, on a higher level, the local economy.

- *They're hurting the city's livelihood and putting people out of work. – Focus Group Participant*
- *The person who gets affected the most is that housekeeper who's cleaning rooms because now they're not getting shifts. – IDI Participant*

Most MEPs were hesitant to say definitively that boycotts are effective (or ineffective). While a few pointed to examples like North Carolina and Indianapolis as times when travel boycotts were effective, others report a lack of data and consistency on either side. There is agreement boycotts can bring attention to a discriminatory policy, but bringing awareness to a policy is as far as most participants go to say boycotts help.

- *Boycotts are effective in getting a point across to the rest of the nation. – Focus Group Participant*
- *I'm not sure I've ever seen the positive effect of travel boycotts except for maybe the five minutes of fame for those proposing the boycott. – Focus Group Participant*
- *May bring temporary attention, but rarely affect real change for the maligned group – Focus Group*

After an open-ended discussion on messaging, MEPs were presented with a statement against the weaponization of travel. Below is a "heat map" of that statement which represents the words and phrases MEPs found compelling, unconvincing and polarizing. Words in green are seen as compelling, those in red unconvincing, and polarization is reflected in yellow. Font size reflects intensity.

Travel boycotts hurt small businesses and local residents who rely on the meetings and events industry. **They are much less likely to hurt politicians who actually have the power to change the policies that have incited the boycott.**

Moreover, **many travel boycotts** have proven to be ineffective in affecting policy. There are better ways to influence politicians that are less harmful and just as, if not more, effective.

As meeting and event professionals, we should not be engaging in a tactic that hurts our own industry.

Meetings and events are a way to bring people together, not divide, and we should be participating in ways to further that mission.

As noted by the amount of green text above, most participants found the tested message compelling. Given that participants voiced unaided boycotts hurt innocent bystanders, it is fitting that messaging like “travel boycotts hurt small businesses and local residents” performs well.

- *We should not hurt our neighbor by taking the food out of their hands. I would sign my name to that document. It was exactly spot on. – IDI Participant*
- *In the beginning of the statement, it really touched home to me that it affects the frontline people and not the politicians. – IDI Participant*

MEP-specific messaging that “meetings and events are a way to bring people together” also tested well, appealing to what some describe as a love for their industry. Bringing people together is what many MEPs love about their job and boycotts go against that mission.

- *[I find this compelling because] the mission of events is overriding the negative factor; bringing people together and providing income for many, many people in the community. – Focus Group Participant*
- *This appeals to my love of my profession & industry. – Focus Group Participant*

Messaging that speaks to “hurting politicians” or “boycotts being ineffective” did not play as well. On the former, the negative tone feels divisive and is perhaps an overreach, as not all agree the goal of boycotts is to harm elected officials. On the latter, speaking to the ineffectiveness of boycotts is less compelling without facts and figures, and, again some point to cities like Indianapolis as examples to the contrary.

- *I don't think the goal of boycotts is to HURT politicians, but rather to highlight a moral issue. – Focus Group Participant*
- *If this line is to be used, it is ineffective because it must have research to back it up. The media does not share the effects and they may be hard to pin down. – Focus Group Participant*

When asked what should be changed or added to this statement, MEPs resoundingly ask for facts and figures, or “hard information, not blanket statements.” Many also want politics taken out altogether, as one MEP articulated, “avoid all mentions of politicians, this is not the business we're getting into.”

Most did not initially support boycotts and after discussion and review of the messaging, most say that has not changed. A few MEPs report they are less likely to participate, citing the harm caused by boycotts as the reason their opposition strengthened. Just two participants said they were more likely to participate in a travel boycott. Open ends reveal these MEPs feel a strong sense of civic duty to boycott and are likely non-persuadable.

- *I was unlikely to participate before and remain that way. Have not seen a compelling counterargument. – Focus Group Participant*
- *I am less likely to support boycotts because after realizing and discussing the hurt it puts the location, it would be difficult to support. – Focus Group Participant*
- *How else does change happen unless you fight the injustice? What better way do you suggest? – Focus Group Participant*

Alternatives

Overall, if clients or attendees voice a desire to boycott a location, MEPs seem quick to engage with little objection. The research reveals this may be due in part to a lack of understanding for alternatives. Without this knowledge, MEPs do not feel empowered to advocate for visiting boycotted locations. For some, advocacy might still be too strong of a sentiment, but almost all agree having all options on the table is beneficial and strongly desired.

Indeed, MEPs have a hard time articulating alternatives they as MEPs can present to their clients. Rather, many fall back to traditional civic actions such as voting, demonstrations, petitions and media coverage (either traditional or social) and few are unable to name a “best” alternative.

When provided with examples, some react positively to the idea of using the meeting to organize attendees, whether by developing sessions during the event to discuss the issue, organizing a volunteer event or civic activity or engaging with local media. For others though, taking an active stance is just too political.

By their nature, MEPs believe the meetings they host are inclusive. Recall the sentiment from the messaging exercise where MEPs found “meetings and events are a way to bring people together” compelling, partly because it appealed to their love of industry. Overall, MEPs want their events to be inclusive and, while not a direct analogy to boycotts, many say they have policies in place to ensure attendees feel welcome. Some of these policies are subtler, following the mantra of “be neutral and respectful to all” and generally ensuring the meeting reflects the values of the organization’s mission. Some MEPs do push further though – listing inclusive networking events, ensuring facilities so that all feel comfortable (e.g. pumping rooms, gender neutral bathrooms, ADA approved venues, etc.), having industry events to share best practices on holding inclusive events and partnering with local businesses to show their support for inclusivity (e.g., something as simple as having a sticker or decal in the window).

- *Again, it’s knowing your attendee base, but trying to educate yourself like crazy. I’m constantly reading newsletters, participating in webinars, and doing everything you can for having the gender-neutral restrooms, having everything be as inclusive as possible based on your attendee base. –IDI Participant*

Trusted Partners & Information Sources

